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Witnessing Violence through Photography: A reply

The article by Frank Moeller (2017) offers a really interesting set of provocations about the role of photojournalism in an era of social media, and more generally, about how professional journalists and citizen journalists navigate their role as witnesses to violence. It intervenes in a mediated landscape of visual representation that is changing quickly and dramatically, and I appreciate its effort to slow that process down and think carefully about its implications. This kind of patient work is more difficult than it seems: too often we are sucked into drawing out a simplified and singular *meaning* from a photograph, and then linking that up to wider and supposedly uncontested political positions (e.g. pro-war; anti-war). What this paper does well is telescope out of that minimal account of visual interpretation to ask how the foundations of photography itself are radically changing.

The article is most interested in re-imagining the debates over photojournalism – its standards, its account of itself, its abiding importance – through more conceptual and theoretical ideas about witnessing. Certainly the emergence of citizen journalism has provoked this kind of foundational questioning, but Frank Moeller is well aware that our received understandings of photojournalism have always been contingent and somewhat contested. What interests me most here is how the analysis reveals our underlying and persistent anxiety over the way photography forces us to engage with ‘the real’. Despite eloquent, compelling and widely read refutations of photography’s supposedly privileged link with reality (from Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes amongst others), it seems we can’t stop worrying about this relationship. When it comes to photography, I’m all for more considered worrying, careful teasing out, and difficult conceptual struggling, so it is no surprise that I like the way this article repositions that worrying onto the tensions between professional photojournalism, citizen journalism and acts of witnessing.

While I really like what this contribution does, I want to push the analysis a little further. This is not to detract from the insights provided in the article, but rather to help us think collectively about where our critical analyses of photography, visibility, war and witnessing might go from here. Frank Moeller sets up two central oppositions in his contribution: on the one hand between photojournalism and citizen journalism, and on the other hand between political witnessing and moral witnessing. In a sense, the article is an elongated process of re-mapping the first opposition through the co-ordinates of the second one. The first opposition (photojournalism vs. citizen journalism) provides a great deal of information on the powerful ideal-type framework that photojournalists operate within (i.e. presence, non-partisanship, non-interference and proximity to action), and shows how citizen journalism is contrasted to this. What interests me most in this distinction is the author’s central typology: photojournalism reveals war ‘like it *is*’, whereas citizen journalism reveals war ‘like it *feels*.’

For me, this distinction deserves much more attention, because its simplicity masks a whole set of relations, experiences and affective attunements that have the capacity to show us a wholly different account of photography. Frank Moeller (2017) acknowledges that, of course, photojournalists are citizens too (and therefore subject to emotions, attachments and commitments), and that citizen journalists are professional actors too (and therefore demonstrate rationality, pragmatism and systematization in their work). But I wanted more of this: these kinds of leakages are politically important because they overturn the foundational security we derive from thinking / writing / living /

acting in binary terms. If we take the distinction between ‘how war *is*’ vs. ‘how war *feels*’ seriously, we must reveal the work the structuring logic of emotion / reason actually does to our analysis of photographic witnessing. For me, the missing step here is showing how that constitutive logic is *itself* unstable by tracing how it comes unstuck. In other words, I can’t help but think about (a) the lurking emotional and affective forces that puncture photojournalism’s claim to (and performance of) veracity, neutrality and objectivity; and (b) the new professional (if informal) codes that citizen journalists are developing, learning and sharing with each other, and how this operates in a mediated online space. As thinkers of affect rightly argue, thinking and feeling are not mutually exclusive, which means that we need to do more work to trouble those binaries in our thinking and writing.

The same urge to deconstruct ordering binaries guides my reading of Margalit’s (2004) distinction between political and moral witnessing that is invoked in the second half of this paper. The author claims that using work from outside the familiar debates within photojournalism is productive because it is *unsafe*: it subjects the assumed traditions of photojournalism to deeper more interdisciplinary analysis. I am absolutely on board with efforts to critique narrowly defined debates about photography – especially when these efforts foreground difficult questions about political, moral and ethical parameters. Once again, however, I found Margalit’s distinction between political and moral highly constraining and reductive. What experience of witnessing violence could be considered *not* political? Or even *not* moral? What purpose do these distinctions serve, other than to obscure the complex, messy, impure, ambivalent, difficult, unexpected, surprising, horrifying and challenging experience of encountering violence – whether that encounter is between participants, photojournalists, citizen journalists, bystanders, diplomats, watchers or viewers? Instead of trying to parcel up the untameable world into reductive and oppositional categories like ‘political’ and ‘moral’, why don’t we try and think harder about what happens in the agonistic space *between* these two positions? What would it mean for our analysis of photography if we *started* with conceptions of relationality, encounter, circulation and entanglement rather than with pre-given, static and oppositional binaries? Here, I would push the author to develop his account of David Campbell’s work on visibility (2017; 2007) which offers a useful – and in my view more politically productive – counterpoint to Margalit’s rather immobile binary framework.

While I understand Moeller’s desire to formulate these binary typologies as a heuristic device (and he is explicit in acknowledging the risks that such simplicity entails), I’m much more interested in what happens underneath that edifice – in the complicated, messy and impure relations that emerge between embodied photographer subjects and the atmospheres (both proximal and distant) they move in, the technologies they utilize, their imagined audiences, their professional milieus and the mediated spaces in between all these forces. I think this contribution is a very good starting place to begin opening up these difficult questions about photography and witnessing: it justifies why these are important questions to ask, and provides helpful historical and professional contexts to the debate.

References

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